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PROGRAM Meet the Press STATION WRC TV
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SUBJECT An Interview with Admiral Poindexter

J MARVIN KALB: It was in an obscure Lebanese magazine two weeks ago that the story was first disclosed, that former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane made a secret trip to Iran on a plane carrying military supplies, part of a highly controversial plan, authorized by President Reagan in July, 1985, shortly after his cancer surgery, to open a negotiating channel to the Ayatollah Khomeini and his contending factions in hopes of improving relations and getting American hostages out of Lebanon. This new Iranian connection: that's our theme today, with our guest Admiral John Poindexter, the President's current National Security Adviser, who has masterminded this operation and been sharply criticized as a result.

This is "Meet the Press," Sunday, November 16th, 1986.

Hello, and welcome once again. I'm Marvin Kalb.

It is the broad consensus here in Washington that this new Iranian connection has damaged America's credibility among moderate Arab states and West European allies, and, in addition, raised questions about the administration's competence in the handling of recent foreign policy problems, including a disinformation campaign against Libya that backfired; a summit in Iceland that produced confusion and damaged chances for an arms control agreement, and now Iran.

Admiral Poindexter, let's begin. And I think the best place is with the hostages.

ADMIRAL JOHN POINDEXTER: Good morning.

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KALB: You said on Friday that even with all of these disclosures, you remained essentially optimistic that the hostages may soon be released. But Donald Regan, the chief of staff, said he was pessimistic. The President himself said on Thursday night that the opportunity might now have been blown with these disclosures.

So tell us in your view right now, where do we stand on getting the hostages out?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Well, it's a judgment call. Everybody has their own assessment as to the likelihood. As the President said in his speech the other night, there is the possibility that the chances for progress have been damaged. It's a very iffy situation at the moment. But I'm basically an optimist, as the President is. And we will keep working toward getting the hostages freed. It's possible that this may progress to the point where we could get some positive results.

KALB: Okay. But what is that optimism based on? What is the evidence that you can share with us that would give you a sense of optimism?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Well, I think one of the difficulties in understanding a situation like this is the fact that you're missing the long, intense conversations that have been held with our interlocutors, and based on those conversations, which were done by experts in the area, it's their assessment that we were making some progress. And if the situation in Teheran can stabilize, then it is possible that we could still make some progress in our relationship, which will be advantageous in freeing the hostages.

KALB: Admiral, yesterday the Islamic Jihad, which reportedly still holds two American hostages, said in a statement that the U. S. should play a bigger role and take wider steps to resolve this problem.

Do you think they are hinting that they would like to have more American arms sent to Iran, which is the sponsor for Islamic Jihad?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: I don't know what they meant. It would be pure speculation, since we've not had any direct contact with the captors. I think that's a very important point to keep in mind throughout this discussion of this project. Iran did not take the hostages. They are not holding the hostages. They do not have total control over the Hezbollah faction that apparently has the hostages.

So I don't really know for certain what the Hezbollah

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faction that made the announcement yesterday had in mind.

KALB: Admiral, there's no question in my mind that we're going to have many more questions about Iran, and we will be joined by our panel of Andrea Mitchell, White House correspondent for NBC News, and Bob Woodward, the assistant managing editor of The Washington Post, when "Meet the Press" returns right after these messages.

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KALB: We are back on "Meet the Press" with Admiral John Poindexter, the President's National Security Adviser, the key official in setting up this new Iranian connection. We'll begin the questioning with Mr. Woodward.

BOB WOODWARD: I'd like to ask about trust for a moment. Congress was cut out of the secret Iranian project for ten months, though it was an intelligence operation. We now have reports this morning that Admiral Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was not involved, had to read about it in the newspapers; grumblings from the State Department. Is there a breakdown of trust within the government?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, I don't think so, Bob. There will always be special circumstances. They usually come about when human lives are at stake, as it was in this case with hostages. And in those situations, it's going to be the natural tendency of any President, as we have observed in the past, to keep these projects very tightly held. In this particular case, the Constitution and the applicable laws clearly provide for the possibility of the President, under special situations like this, to inform the Congress after the fact. This was not a military operation, so it's not unusual that the Chairman of the JCS would not be aware.

KALB: Admiral, with all due respect, I think that what we've learned from the past is not that this is the natural course, but that this is the unnatural course. When President Carter kept to a very, very small group the whole effort in that Iranian rescue mission, it fell apart; it was aborted. What the lesson of Vietnam is you can't share these things with just a few people to have a successful policy.

Could you please explain what you were just saying?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: I think that the special situations are all very difficult issues. They're all risky. It's a problem of risk management. It's not unusual that you don't have a hundred percent success rate. For example, on Grenada, we kept that very quiet. The appropriate people were involved, and

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it was very successful. Sometimes you win on these issues: sometimes you lose.

WOODWARD: You believe you've lost on this one?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, I'm not prepared to say that yet, Bob. I think, as I said earlier to Marvin, that there's still a chance for some progress here. It will depend on how the situation develops and materializes in Teheran, and we'll have to wait and see how that works out.

WOODWARD: Were you ordered not to tell the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff what this was?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, not at all. It's just simply -- as I said earlier, it wasn't a military issue, so it's not unusual.

The main point here is that the President's senior national security advisers, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence, my predecessor and I were all involved in the initial discussions of the policy. The President listened to all of the recommendations that were made and made a decision. That's what Presidents get paid for.

ANDREA MITCHELL: Admiral, expanding a little bit on the issue of trust, you told us in a handwritten statement on November 4th that the arms embargo against Iran would remain in effect as long as Iran was supporting terrorism. And that was expanded by the press spokesman to say also that Iran still was supporting terrorism.

Now wasn't that, in the very best of characterizations, misleading?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, I don't think so at all, Andrea. The point is the arms embargo still continues. We do not feel it is in our national interest that the floodgates be thrown open to allow arms to be shipped.

MITCHELL: Let me just ask you this. You're saying that, and the President has said, that because the amounts were, you claim, miniscule and because the arms were, you claim, only defensive, not offensive -- and we'll get into whether that is really the case -- that, therefore, the arms embargo continues. Isn't that like being just a little bit pregnant?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, I don't think so. You try to paint things too black or white. There're always shades of gray in issues. In managing these kinds of problems in an imperfect

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world, there will be exceptions made. They were made in this case under very controlled circumstances.

The thing that you need to focus on is what the objectives are, what was the objective of the arms embargo, what was the objective of our project with Iran.

MITCHELL: Well, let me just focus for a moment on the arms embargo and on your statement now that it continues. On October 2nd, the Secretary of State told our Arab allies that the Soviet Union was not being as forceful as we are in stopping countries from sending arms to Iran. All our diplomacy, public and private, as well as your statements to the press, were that the arms embargo was continuing while, at the same time, we were permitting shipments to Iran.

Why is that not only inconsistent, but dishonest?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: What the Secretary of State said is precisely right. We have been much more active than the Soviet Union in terms of trying to limit and stop the arms shipments to Iran. We feel....

MITCHELL: While also shipping arms ourselves?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: The amount that was shipped, as the President said the other night in his speech, was extremely small, has no military significance in terms of the war along the border with Iraq. It was more a matter of providing a measure of good faith on our part. There's been a great deal of suspicion on both sides after seven very traumatic years in the U. S.-Iranian relationship. And it was a matter of providing some support to those factions within Iran that we believe, after long discussions with them, have objectives that are very similar to ours.

KALB: But why did the support have to come in the form of military supplies?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: The question is, in dealing with a situation like this that's very complex and where there is a lot of misunderstanding, you look for some mechanism that provides a currency for the effort. And in this case, the items that we felt would be the most significant in terms of demonstrating that they were, indeed, dealing with the U. S. government and that we had not only our interests in mind, but we also had Iranian interests in terms of stopping the war. For example, we firmly believe that it's not only in our interests and the rest of the Persian Gulf area, but it's also in Iran's interest to stop the war so that they can get their economy going again, so they can quit killing people and so that they'll have a better prospect

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for the future.

WOODWARD: Sir, in terms of this broad policy with Iran, are we, the U. S. government, in any form giving support to Iranian exile groups or dissidents who want to overthrow the Khomeini regime?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Bob, I can't get into any other possible operations that we might be involved with or not. We've had to go public on this because of all of the speculation and the leaks that have come out of the area. But I don't want to confirm or deny any other operations....

WOODWARD: Are there other secret operations, intelligence operations, that Congress has not been informed of?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: There are none. I have....

WOODWARD: There are none. This was the only one?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: In my discussions over the past week with the leadership in the Congress, I've made it very clear that this is the only finding that the President signed that was signed under these conditions and which exercised the President's right....

KALB: But at the same time, Donald Regan said on Friday -- and I don't know if it was a slip of the tongue or not -- but he did say that part of the effort was to form a new Iranian leadership. Now if the English language means anything, the question that Bob has just asked you is very relevant. Is the United States now, either in support of Iranian exiles or directly, working with people in Iran seeking the overthrow of the Khomeini regime?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: We aren't seeking the overthrow of the Khomeini regime. It's a matter of talking to moderate elements there and trying to get them to see that their present policies with regard to terrorism, with regard to the war should be changed and that it's in their interests, as well as ours. And so it's not a matter of changing the government; it's a matter of changing the government's policies.

KALB: Okay. Now who are these moderates? I think that's one of the most puzzling aspects of this whole story. Who are the moderates in Iran?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Well, I don't really want to identify names today. But there are basically.....

KALB: You mean officials who are in the government who

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are moderate and take a different line from the Ayatollah?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: There are basically three factions within the government in Iran. There are conservatives; there are moderates; and then there are the more radical. Now all of these terms are relative. They're relative to the situation in Iran. And one of the difficult things the government has had is there is not total agreement on the policies. And it is our objective to support and encourage those elements that are moderate to conservative, because the policies of those groups are more like ours.

KALB: Admiral, it's time for a break. "Meet the Press" will be back right after these messages.

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KALB: We are back on "Meet the Press" with Admiral John Poindexter, the President's National Security Adviser. And we'll resume the questioning with Miss Mitchell.

MITCHELL: Admiral, the President said that his policy against negotiating with terrorists is intact, because he was dealing with Iranians who might have influence over the captors, but not the captors themselves.

How do we really know that the supplies that we sent to these people in Iran do not in some way provide material support to Hezbollah or Islamic Jihad?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: With regard to the specific question about what was transferred to Iran, we are very confident because it was the tye of material that the Hezbollah faction in Lebanon would have no use for.

MITCHELL: But there could have been a chain where you provide something to Iran and other things that are needed by the captors are provided.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: We simply just don't believe that's the case. In the long discussions, as I was saying earlier, that we've had with these people, we simply don't believe that that's the situation. The Hezbollah faction -- their demand has been the release of Adama prisoners. And we are not willing to meet that demand.

MITCHELL: And why do you believe, and why does the President believe, that there has been a truce for some 18 months from Iran in supporting terrorism? It seems to me that, in July of '85, the President included Iran on a list of what he called a new international form of Murder, Inc., state sponsored terror-

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ism. Three Americans were taken by what you yourself believe are radical Iranian factions in recent months.

So why are you contending that Iran is no longer supporting terrorism?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Because there are some elements within Iran that are still advocating the use of terror to accomplish their political ends, we still list Iran as a state that sponsors terrorism. However, the facts remain that the moderate elements that we were talking to, we think, did have some impact on stopping the hostage taking in Lebanon for about a year.

MITCHELL: But doesn't the fact that we were supplying military equipment to Iran indicate that we were supplying equipment to a state that you've just said still sponsors terrorism?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: We were supplying this material specifically to the moderate elements so that they would develop and exercise more influence....

MITCHELL: To overthrow the Khomeini regime?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Not to overthrow the government, but simply to gain more support for their more moderate views. And that, we think, is important.

WOODWARD: Admiral, do you support now a full airing of how this policy was constructed, how it was carried out before Congress? Will you go testify before the appropriate committees? Will Lt. Colonel North so testify?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Bob, we are very anxious to discuss in great detail with the appropriate congressional committees under the appropriate circumstances. There is still a large portion of the details that we want to keep classified to protect individuals who are involved and try to salvage as much of the channel that we can. So all of this won't be public or in unclassified ways.

WOODWARD: Will you testify under oath, or will you invoke executive privilege?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Bob, as you very well know, the President's National Security Adviser, as well as the rest of this immediate staff, is not in the habit of testifying.

KALB: Meaning you won't?

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ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: I'm not saying that quite that directly. I have talked....

[Laughter.]

KALB: I understand that. That's why I was asking the question.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: I have talked to some of the appropriate leadership on the Hill, and I will make arrangements to talk informally with them. There will be hearings in which I probably will not participate. But I am anxious that they hear from me to understand the thinking on our part behind this project and to understand some of the subtleties that were involved.

WOODWARD: This was basically an intelligence or a CIA operation. Is that correct?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: That is correct. It was basically an intelligence operation.

WOODWARD: So Director Casey will be the one who will now lay it out to the Congress.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: That's correct.

WOODWARD: Will he be under any restrictions?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, nothing different from the usual situation in that we still like to protect raw intelligence. But in terms of all of the actions that were taken as a result of the project, they'll all be laid out in detail.

MITCHELL: Admiral, now this, as you say, was a high risk operation. Wasn't one of the risks the fact that the Iraqis and the Saudis are now very distressed. Prince Bandar, the Ambassador from Saudi Arabia, met with you and, we understand, was outraged by what happened.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: That simply is not an accurate report, Andrea. We have felt all along that once we were able to reveal all of the details to our moderate Arab friends and when they understood that the objective that we had was exactly the same as their objective, which is to bring the war to an end, they would understand our actions.

MITCHELL: Well, some of them are now suggesting that Israel was, in fact, the project manager for this, that this was an Israeli initiative which served the interests, the foreign policy interests of Israel, but didn't really serve our in-

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terests.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: This project was a United States government project that served, in our view, our national interests. It's as simple as that.

MITCHELL: But a senior official told us the other day, who's very familiar with national security affairs, that the United States government condoned the Israeli shipment in September of 1985, which resulted in the release of Benjamin Weir.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: As I have told members of the press and media before, we don't want to publicly get into the details of the shipments, because that provides information to factions within Iran to identify who was dealing with us, and so we're not talking publicly about those details.

MITCHELL: About condoling Israel....

KALB: Admiral, I'd like to ask you about the way in which the government is now functioning in the whole area of foreign policy, the impression of disarray.

Donald Regan said -- direct quote: "Some of us are like a shovel brigade that follow a parade down Main Street cleaning up." Unquote.

Now is that really what the White House staff should be involved in?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Well, I guess I would have to take exception to that definition as to what the White House staff is involved with. We have an active President who likes and feels that bold action is often required in order to change the status quo. If you look at his approach to domestic issues, it's the same kind of approach. He challenged the conventional wisdom. People thought Reaganomics wouldn't work. Well, it did work. People thought he couldn't get tax reform through. But he did do that.

KALB: Okay. But on the area of foreign policy, there is certainly the impression that you are involved primarily in damage control, not in bold initiatives.

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: No, I don't think that's true at all. It's just that, in the foreign policy area, the issues are very complex. Sometimes you're able to make progress; sometimes you aren't. But if we just sit back and don't think of new, creative ways of addressing some of these difficult problems, we'll never make any progress.

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MITCHELL: Admiral, can I just clear up one fact about the kinds of weapons.

The Defense Ministry, the Israeli Defense Minister, Mr. Rabin, has said that nothing was sent by Israel, no American weapons that were not directly approved by the United States. Is that true?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: I don't care to answer that question in public. Our relations with all of the third countries that may or may not have been involved in this should be private.

MITCHELL: Can you at least deny the reports that have come to us from very authoritative sources in Israel that they did ship offensive weapons, parts for jet fighters?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: The point that the President has made and that I've made before on this issue is that the only shipments that the U. S. government authorized were those that the President described the other night, which taken in toto would fill a single cargo aircraft. That is the extent of the U. S. involvement with Iran on this issue.

WOODWARD: I would like to ask you about your own shovel....

KALB: You have thirty seconds.

WOODWARD: ...if I might for a moment.

KALB: Fifteen.

WOODWARD: Okay, in terms of damage control. Do you think you've done an effective job in explaining what's going on on this and disinformation, what happened in Iceland?

ADMIRAL POINDEXTER: Yes, I think so. I think we try very hard to get all the facts out.

KALB: Admiral, I'm sorry, our time's up. Thank you very much for being our guest today and discussing I guess this really remarkable story of Ronald Reagan trying to set up a secret overture and policy with the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. History, I guess, provides us with a series of strange bedfellows.

But that's it for now. Thank you all for joining us, and we'll see you next Sunday.

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